

Thieves, Business Deals, and Religious Fanatics

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Summary: Based on Looking Glass Studio's Thief: the Dark Project.
Garrett goes looking for a new fence.

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Notes: This is a piece of fanfiction based on Looking Glass Studio's incredible game, Thief: The Dark Project. If you haven't ever played this game, I strongly suggest that you find it and rectify your error. Heck, if nothing else, at least download the demo. Chronologically, this story takes place shortly after the end of the game and thus contains major spoilers.

Disclaimer: Garrett, the Keepers, and the Hammerites are all trademarks of Looking Glass Studios and Eidos Entertainment. They are used here without permission, but since none of them were doing anything with these incredibly cool characters I figured they wouldn't mind too much if I borrowed them for one afternoon.

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The streets seemed more crowded than usual for a winter night. Not that Garret was complaining about the fact. After all, it was even easier to hide in a crowd than it was to hide in the shadows, where he normally skulked. However, he had made a living in noticing the small little variances from the normal patterns in the environment as they often served as warning signs to one of his occupation. Thus, even a small discrepancy that worked to his advantage triggered and instinctive wariness in the thief.

Garrett shoved down his anxieties, but kept his senses alert. He would need to be on his best guard for his scheduled meeting tonight.

After all, it wouldn't do for the Hammerites to nail him while he was scouting out a new prospective fence.

He still felt a brief stab of bitter anger whenever he let his thoughts dwell on that cursed sect. If not for their interference, his meeting tonight would never have even been necessary. Cutty had been one of the best and most reliable fences that he had known in his twenty some odd years of thieving. He had even preferred the man to some of the contacts that the Keepers had employed in their vast underground network. But, those self-righteous Hammerites hadn't approved too much of his means of employment and had left him to rot in one of their cells. Call it occupational hazards. Cutty had managed to survive long enough to tell Garrett that he wasn't going to be able to pay him for his last job.

Of course, his intense disdain was mutually felt by the organization. He had embarrassed them one too many times for their tastes. And apparently, forgive and forget was not a part of their doctrine when it came too dealing with embarrassments. Thus, it suited the interests of everyone involved for him to just keep his distance a certain period of time, like the rest of his life.

The thief continued to deftly maneuver his way though the thick crowds, drawing on all the training that the Keepers had drilled into him to avoid the notice and attention of all those around him. The last thing that he needed was for someone to follow him to his scheduled appointment. He rounded a corner and caught sight of the agreed upon meeting place, The Golden Crown Inn, up ahead of him.

Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a brief flicker of movement at the far end of the street. On instinct, Garrett focused his concentration on the area where his eyes had registered the swift movement. The motion gradually resolved itself into the form of a man in a dark black cloak, moving effortlessly through the tight crowd of people, who remained oblivious to his presence. Garrett didn't have to see the ring on his finger to know that it was a Keeper.

Sensing that his presence had been detected, the Keeper's eyes immediately turned towards him. His features registered slight surprise as their eyes met. When a Keeper does not want to be seen, he is not seen. Garrett returned the stare coolly, his eyes narrowing in unmistakable antipathy. The Keeper held his gaze for a few more moments before blending back into the crowd and disappearing around another street corner.

Garrett felt the tension slowly drain from his body as the dark form disappeared from view. His vendetta with the Hammerites, while definitely more bloody and violent in nature, wasn't even a patch on the rift that had developed between him and his former masters. Even though the sting of his expulsion from the underground society had long since faded, the lingering animosities would always be there. Those animosities were compounded by the fact that the Keepers still insisted that it was he who had left them. Garrett supposed that in a certain sense, it was the truth, but the options they had given him had simply left him no choice but to leave them.

He sighed softly and shook his head. There was no point in dwelling on the past when the past could not be changed, even had he desired

to change it. Garrett brought his focus back to the present and continued across the street to the Golden Crown Inn. It was now time for him to concentrate on his present and thus, his future.

Garrett slid silently through the doors to the inn, barely disturbing them with his passage. No one looked up or took notice at his entrance, which was exactly as Garrett would have it. Even if someone had been focusing their attention on the front door, all they would have noticed was a brief almost insignificant shift of shadows. Garrett quickly dropped back into the darkened corners of the room, surveying the occupants within.

As he had expected, his right eye adjusted to the darkened interiors of the Inn much more quickly than his left. He didn't like dwelling on the fact, but ever since he had been able to retrieve his eye from the Trickster, it had behaved in ways that he could not explain. Once again, he wondered what exactly the Trickster had done to his eye after having torn it out of his socket. The Woodsie Lord had claimed that he had needed it to reactivate some mystical artifact that he had planned to use in an incantation. Garrett had barely been able to retrieve it and defeat the Trickster in his eventual scheme.

The thief waited the few extra moments necessary for his right eye to catch up with his left eye and then began to swiftly and efficiently scan the room. The contact with whom he had his scheduled meeting went only by the name of "The Bottlemaker" and was an enigma, even to him. But, from the rumors that he had been able to find on the street, or liberate from the private journals of several different nobles, this individual was well connected.

Keeping his back to the wall at all times, Garrett slowly made his way to the corner table where he was scheduled to meet with his potential new fence. He settled onto the hard wooden bench and flipped back the hood of his cloak. He drew the long silver sword that he had received from Constantine and laid it on the table before him. He then unstrapped his bow from his back and propped it against the bench where he was seated. The position of the two items was to act as a signal for The Bottlemaker when he arrived.

He slumped back casually onto the bench and once again began to survey the room, continually wondering which in any of the individuals present was his mysterious contact. He just hoped that he was making the right decision by agreeing to this meeting. The fact that he had sought out The Bottlemaker instead of the other way around went a long way in easing some of his suspicions. He had been burned badly the last time a fence had come looking for him.

He waited for a few more moments before a plump, dark-haired barmaid slowly began to make her way over to his table. She smiled and ran her eyes over him approvingly before saying, "I didn't see you come in stranger. What can I get for you?"

"Just a mug of ale, dark." Garrett responded trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible.

"Are you sure you don't want to sample the chef's roast bird tonight?" she replied with a flirtatious look. "He's really outdone himself this time."

Garret curtly shook his head once again, indicating that he was

certain.

The barmaid shrugged her shoulders in response. "Okay, but I'm warning you, you're missing the opportunity of several lifetimes."

It was only the strictest discipline that allowed Garret to maintain a neutral expression on his face while he secretly recoiled in surprise. The phrase, "opportunity of several lifetimes", had been the agreed upon catch phrase by which the Bottlemaker had agreed to identify himself or, as it now appeared, herself. Garrett allowed his eyes to casually study the barmaid once again, as if he was simply reconsidering her offer. Instead, he was silently memorizing every detail of her appearance.

"Perhaps, I did speak a little hastily," he finally replied. "Go ahead and bring me a leg of this Roast bird along with what-ever soup is in the kettle for tonight."

"Very good sir," she smiled at him once again and was off.

As she strode off into the crowd Garrett quietly began to analyze what he had observed thus far from the woman. The barmaid act was obviously a front, and a fairly elaborate one at that. She had even gone as far to disguise herself for the part, the color of her eyebrows, which had a definite red tint to them, didn't quite match the color of her hair. And much of her generous mass seemed to a result of false layers of cloth rather than actual body fat. He couldn't actually blame her for the ruse, however. Lately, the Hammerites had been cracking down even harder on thieves and their allies.

A few moments later the woman returned to his table and plopped down a mug filled with a frothy dark substance along side a wooden plate loaded with various vegetables and a roasted leg of bird next to his sword. As she leaned over him she whispered in his ear, "Flash gold and ask me to stay at your table for company so we can talk without attracting attention."

Garrett reluctantly reached into his pouch and withdrew a single gold coin. "Fancy to share a drink or too with me wench?" he said in a leering tone.

The Bottlemaker eagerly snatched the coin from his hand and settled in close to him on his bench. "Why, I'd love to kind sir."

"My fences tend to pay me, not the other way around," he whispered to after she had settled in.

"Consider it the price of the meeting. Time is money to me, after all." She replied in the same low tone.

"Likewise," he said, removing his sword from the table and placing it back in its sheath.

"That's the blade from the Constantine job isn't it?" she asked casually, while admiring the steel. "That was a damn impressive piece of work. I should have figured that it would have been you to pull it off."

Just the mention of the Trickster's false identity invoked a bitter taste in his mouth. The Woodsie Lord had really made a complete fool out of him and he still didn't really feel like talking about his fantastic error. "I try not to signature my work too much, it tends to attract unwanted attention."

"Well, you certainly left your mark all over the Ramirez job," she retorted playfully.

"There are exceptions," Garrett conceded as he began to curiously probe the meat on the table in front of him with his knife. Satisfied, he sliced off a piece and stuffed it in his mouth.

The woman watched him eat in silence for a few moments before finally getting to the point. "Well, rumor has it that you are looking for a new person to move your merchandise."

Garrett merely nodded in reply as he began to chew on another piece of fowl. After all, if he was going to pay the exorbitant rates for their food, he might as well enjoy it.

Bottlemaker's eyes took on a definite appraising look as she studied him. "Well, I would be lying if I said that I had never once heard of the exploits of Garrett the thief. Your name is often whispered among the circles I frequent. Quite frankly, most of my colleagues would probably leap at the opportunity to add you their rolls."

"But?" Garret asked while moving on to the vegetables on his plate.

She leaned back in her seat, her face taking on a speculative expression. "But, you're a little too much of an enigma for my taste Mr. Garrett. Oh, certainly everyone knows that you're a thief and a good one. However, your past is clouded in mystery. There are whispers and rumors, but no one truly knows where it is that you come from or where it is that you acquired your exceptional skills."

The woman arched an eyebrow at him before continuing. "None of the Wardens claim you as one of their own and no other thief knows anything about you other than the fact that you arrived on the scene mysteriously several years ago and strait away began to make a name for yourself."

The thief paused momentarily in his eating to snort in contempt. "What do you want from me, assurances of my good intentions? Seems rather counter-productive considering our choices of occupation."

Garrett could sense her lips thinning in response to his remark. "The one undeniable piece of information that I have managed to obtain is that you have a bad attitude."

He simply shrugged. "Even among the Hammerites that isn't punishable by death, flogging maybe, but not death."

He continued to eat in silence for a few more moments while she appraised him. "I just want to make sure that you're not going to end up being more trouble than you are really worth. Your kind always tends to attract trouble the way a corpse attracts maggots."

Garrett casually took a deep draw from his mug. "And what exactly is my kind?"

She gave him an innocent look. "A few names come to mind. Most of them are now immortalized in books of legend, but in their time they caused friend and colleague alike a great deal of trouble."

Without really realizing what he was doing, Garrett slammed his mug back onto the table, sending some of the frothy liquid sloshing over the side. "I'm no hero. Just a thief." He iterated coldly. A few patrons from the closer tables glanced up in mild curiosity at his sudden outburst, causing Garrett to suddenly feel very foolish. He knew better than to attract attention to him in such a setting.

The Bottlemaker simply smirked at him, obviously pleased at being able to get pass his normally unflappable nature. "So you claim, but I have heard a great deal of fantastic stories about you that many a hero would envy to have sung of him."

"Such as?" Garrett really wasn't at all interested in what current rumors were circulating about him but he needed a few moments to regain his composure. One of the paramount rules of his trade was to never attempt to negotiate a deal while drunk or angry.

She shrugged in response. "They say that you cannot be killed, that you simply return from the dead to inflict vengeance on those who would attempt to cross you. They say that you have walked among the dead within the old city, yet have emerged unscathed. Some believe that you already are dead and that only your spirit remains to torment corrupt nobles. There are those you would swear that you never were a human in the first place, but a dark god sent to torment the mortals of this realm." She arched a questioning eyebrow at him.

Garrett simply shook his head in amusement. He was truly amazed at what some fools would spout when they had enough alcohol inside of them. "That's what I love about this line of work. The pay may not be the best at times but it's the only job where you can be promoted from mortal to deity."

The fence sighed wistfully before continuing, "However, you still haven't truly answered my question." She leaned forward to stare directly into his eyes. "How do I know that I can trust you?"

Garrett calmly drained the last of his ale before responding. "As long as you can provide good jobs that pay well without too many questions, you can trust me. A good fence is far too valuable a commodity to be squandered."

She chewed on her thumb for a few moments in thought. He could see the inner conflict that was taking place in her eyes as she tried to reach a decision. Garrett found that he couldn't really fault her for her caution. As far as she knew, he was just an unknown entity. She didn't know the first thing about the Keepers and their dark secrets and thus would have no point of reference with which to judge him. Besides, it was very unlikely that the Keepers would be willing to give him a good reference anyway.

Finally, the woman seemed to come to a resolution and extended her right hand. "If we meet in the bar or any public place you can refer to me as Shanna."

Garrett cautiously accepted her hand, knowing that in doing so he was effectively sealing a pact between the two of them. "Is that your real name, or just something you use while seducing the locals?"

Another wicked smile lit up Shanna's features. "It's as real as you want it to be. After all, I make my living satisfying the wants and needs of my customers."

As a thief, he was familiar enough with his own strange duality of identity to require no further explanation from his knew fence. "Shanna it is then. I suppose that we should discuss the terms of my employment." This was the part of the meeting for which the thief had wanted to maintain his wits.

Shanna let out a small silvery laugh. "Ah yes, time for me to pound out an agreeable contract with the man who once broke into Cragscleft prison just to get the money that his fence owed him."

She studied him for a moment to see if he would react. However, Garrett kept his features calmly blank, prompting her to finally ask, "That was you, wasn't it?"

The thief merely shrugged as he finished off the last of his vegetables. "Your guess is as good as mine."

He could see a faint trace of disappointment in her eyes, which she quickly covered. Garrett was about to begin listing his ultimatums, when one of his deeply honed instincts began broadcasting alert. He turned his attention towards the front entrance just in time to note the arrival of several Hammerites mounted on horseback. Though the gaps in the doorframe he carefully watched as three of the acolytes dismounted and began to move towards the entrance of The Golden Crown Inn.

He whirled his gaze back on Shanna to study her reaction to the new arrivals. Her face displayed an expression of surprised confusion that could have been genuine. Garrett, however, was not quite willing to trust appearances just yet. The last woman whose appearance he had trusted had left him with a very painful reminder of what happens to a thief who lets his guard down.

"What are they doing here? The Hammerites have never shown any interest in any of The Golden Crown Inn's less than legal activities before..." she didn't quite finish the statement before Garrett had brought the point of his dagger to bear directly beneath her ribcage.

"You set me up," his voice dripped with contempt and anger as he pressed the point of the dagger more painfully against her dress.

Garrett had to admit, she knew how to keep her cool, even when the woman was only a breath away from having half a foot of cold steel planted in her heart. "Don't be foolish, why would I ever ally myself with those pigs. They don't exactly take kindly to my occupation

either."

"Maybe they already caught you and cut a deal with you for a larger catch," he whispered menacingly in reply. "I hear Cragscleft is hell on earth for men. I can't imagine what it would be like for a woman. It doesn't take a lot of intelligence to figure out what your choice would be if given the option of spending your remaining there, days having your hands seared off or working with them to get me."

"You're a fool if you truly believe that," she hissed in reply. "If I was planning on setting you up, don't you think that I would have had the foresight to make sure that I was out of your reach when the Hammers showed up?"

Garrett simply glared at her for a few more seconds. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to continue the argument at that moment. "Is there another exit from this place?"

Shanna shook her head slightly. "Nothing on the ground floor. But if you can make it to one of the upstairs room, you might be able to escape through one of the windows."

Seeing that he didn't really have a great deal of options, Garrett decided that following her advice would probably be his best course of action at the moment. "All right then, this is the way that we are going to play it. You get to continue in your roll as the barwench, eager to please your latest customer, and I will play the part of the drunken patron, interested in a night of your company."

He dug the dagger a little deeper into her side to emphasize his point. "Is that perfectly clear to you?"

Her eyes had become like twin pools of ice. "I had better get a very large tip for this, sir."

"Good." He quickly sheathed his blade, grabbed his bow, and then rose unsteadily to his feet, mimicking the movements of a man who had to much wine in him. He drug the unwilling fence up beside him and together they began to drunkenly stagger across the length of the room towards a set of stairs in the far corner.

Garrett had to grudgingly admit Shanna was doing a decent job of keeping up their pretense. She supported most of his weight as they walked, and laughed good-naturedly at the lurid comments shouted at the pair from several of the other patrons, even going as far as the shoot a couple comments of her own back into the crowd. For his own part, he continued to play the part of the drunk, leaning heavily on his guide, slurring his words, and laughing uproariously at nothing in particular.

The thief spared a quick backward glance at the entrance to the Inn to see that the three Hammers had nearly reached its entrance. He turned his attention back to the stairs and silently willed the two of them to move faster. If they could reach the stairs before the Hammerites entered the common room and noticed their presence, he would have a much better chance of escaping the entire situation unscathed.

They were only ten paces from the staircase when he heard the doors

to the Inn swing open and bang a loudly against the wooden doorframe. Garrett mumbled a silent curse and drug Shanna to a stop, halting their progress. Any movement now would simply attract attention. The rumbling buzz of various conversations slowly faded to silence, as the patrons gradually became aware of the new guests. Standing at the entrance, ostensibly dressed in red and white silk, stood the captain of group of Hammerites. He loosely clasped a long menacing hammer in his right hand, casually tapping the weighted head against the floor of the inn.

"Greetings, blasphemers, adulterers, sinners alike," he began in a loud imperious tone. "Make no mistake, I am no more eager to pollute myself or my men, mingling with thy filth than thou are likewise eager to see me." He began to slowly march around the room, his glare sweeping across the Inn as if everything in his sight was an affront to him.

The thief did his best to meld back into the shadows, staying as still as possible in order to further hide his presence, while Shanna did the same. Unfortunately, their present position was in an area that did not afford them a great deal of cover. But as too much movement on his part would definitely attract their attention, his only choice was to slowly inch his way into the shadows.

"However," the captain was continuing, "we have reason to believe that there is among thee an extremely dangerous and reprehensible villain. A man guilty of the most heinous crimes imaginable. And, the by the Builder, we will capture this man from out of thy midst."

_Great, _Garrett thought as he continued to inch his way closer to the safety of the shadows. _Three guesses as to who they're talking about._

The Hammerite captain was now withdrawing a parchment scroll from his belt and unraveling it. "If any of thee hast seen this man, I can promise thee adequate compensation for thy aid, or adequate punishment for thy silence."

He finished opening the scroll and held the parchment aloft so that its contents were visible to all within the room. It was a fairly crude representation, but even from his distance Garrett could clearly recognize his own features. Once again, he cursed his own misfortune even as he ducked his head farther to obscure his face. Since he was playing the role of a drunk he could do so without eliciting too much attention.

The Hammerites continued to slowly orbit the common room, carefully scrutinizing the faces of each individual present. All three carried the characteristic hammer with them, but the third also possessed a bow, which was notched and ready to fire. Garrett continued to slowly make his way toward the shadows, silently willing them to stay at the far end of the Inn.

"I warn thee," the captain had tossed the rendering of Garrett on the table and was continuing in his own path, "this man is a truly dangerous creature and protecting him will do thee no good. Not only will it earn thee our ire, but the condemnation of the Builder for obstructing his holy purposes."

Well, seeing as, according to Hammerite philosophy, I have been obstructing the purposes of the builder for years, I don't really see any reason in changing now, the thief mused privately.

The search continued inexorably onward, as Garrett tried more and more to maneuver himself and his newly acquired fence into the shadows. Once hidden from view, he could easily maneuver around the Hammers and successfully reach the stairs. He inched just a little bit further.

"What art thou doing over there?" Garrett cursed silently as the Hammer with his bow drawn began to move towards them. "Stand forth ye darkspawn and be judged by the servants of the Builder."

The thief palmed his blackjack from his belt even as he allowed his body to slump even farther against Shanna. Any option of getting out of his current situation cleanly was now gone. He would have to settle for just getting out.

"Oh, pay no mind to him, good sir." Shanna was saying with her best barwench voice. "He's simply had a lil' too much for the evenin' and I was gettin' ready ta' take him up ta' sleep it off I was."

"Certain I am that thy intentions were not so pure," the Hammer replied with an ugly scowl. "But let us have a look at this man, first."

Garrett could feel the man's footsteps growing closer. He knew that he would only have one chance to make his crazy plan work and, if he blew it, he would have the opportunity for another, albeit more permanent, visit to Cragscleft.

He waited up until the moment that the Acolyte reached to pull back his hood before making his move. In a blindingly fast motion, he brought the wooden length of the club upwards in a wicked right cross against his opponent's forehead. The man barely even had time to groan in pain before his head snapped back, sending him tumbling into a nearby table.

The two remaining Hammerites twirled around in surprise to find the source of the noise, but Garrett was quicker still. Before they could even complete register what had occurred, Garrett hafted his dagger at the nearer of the two, striking him squarely in the shoulder. Then, without wasting a single movement, he grab Shanna around the waist and hauled her along with him up the stairs.

Upon reaching the stairwell, he quickly slammed the door behind them, latching it in place. He could already here the angry shouts of the to remaining Hammers as they gave chase. The thief only hoped that the door would hold the two remaining Acolytes long enough for him to make good on his escape.

"Come," he stated simply, while grabbing Shanna and dragging her up the stairs.

"You know, you really didn't have to take it upon yourself to rescue me by taking me along with you." Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "I probably would have been able to get away from the Hammerites by myself. Especially since it was you that they were looking for."

"They would have wanted to know what you were doing with me and Hammerite questioning methods are not pleasant," he replied flatly and continued hauling her behind him. "Besides, I still need you."

"Like I said earlier," she huffed, trying to keep up with his pace without stumbling, "your kind attracts trouble."

Garrett merely ignored her as they raced to the first landing. The pounding on the door below was growing louder and he knew that his time was growing shorter. He quickly hauled both of them to an abrupt halt in front of the nearest door and quickly wrenched it open. Inside was a small, functional room with two straw mattresses set on wooden cots. The room was dark, nearly pitch black, which suited his needs perfectly. The only light afforded to the small area came from what moonlight and starlight could filter through the window and that illuminated only a fraction of the entire room.

The window had no glass covering, for such an extravagance was far too costly an amenity for the room's normal patrons. Instead there was simply a rickety old set of wooden shutters to keep the wind out on colder evenings. Garrett crossed the room in several quick strides before throwing the shutters open, allowing a pale pool of light to form around the window frame. He didn't have time to allow both his eyes to adjust to the sudden change in light and thus simply closed his left eye, allowing his right eye to focus instantaneously.

On the darkened streets below, he could easily make out the forms of additional four Hammerites arriving on horseback. They must have been investigating the other buildings in the vicinity and were now answering the call of their brethren inside. Escape by this route would be risky, if not suicidal. There had to be a better way.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Shanna hissed impatiently.

Garrett turned and advanced slowly on her. "I'm not leaving by the window."

"Are you daft?" she asked incredulously. "The Hammers will be here any second. It's the only chance you have."

"Not if they think that I have already left by the window." He smiled grimly. "Then I would be able to easily backtrack around them."

"And why are they going to think that you have already left by the window?" Her voice had taken on a wary tone.

Garrett shrugged, more to mask the movement of pulling his sword from its sheath than anything else. "You'll tell them, of course."

"Now why would they believe me?" She was slowly backing away from him now.

"Because..." As quick as lightning, the thief struck, the blade of his sword slashing wickedly across her abdomen. "...corpses tend to

be more convincing than actual witnesses."

As her body dropped to the floor, he took a moment to examine the blade that he had received from Constantine, once again amazed by the fact that it's metal surface somehow neither caught nor reflected light, even when placed directly in the path of the pale moonbeams. Garrett didn't really want to know what dark magics the Trickster had employed to accomplish that particular trick. In the darkened room, the blade had been effectively invisible, and Shanna hadn't even had a chance to scream.

The thief quickly sheathed the weapon again and then set about dragging Shanna's body over into the moonlight, where it would be clearly visible to anyone who entered into the room. Just as he finished his preparation, the sound of splintering wood announced the eminent arrival of him of his pursuers.

Garrett slid silently into the darker corner of the room and dropped into a practiced crouch. He had chosen the area directly to the right of the doorframe, knowing that the door swung open to the left. There would be little point in setting up this little charade if there were to find him simply by slamming the door in his face upon entering the room.

A split second later, the two Hammerites charged into the room, their large iron mallets drawn and ready for violence. His two pursuers immediately took in the body lying on the floor as well as the open window shudder and made the obvious conclusion. One rushed to the window and thrust his head out into the night air while his companion kneeled briefly to examine the woman.

Their momentary distraction was all the invitation that Garrett needed. As silent as a shadow, he slipped from the confines of the small room and returned to the halls. He had meant to leave that instant and make for the entrance on the ground floor as quickly as possible, yet he felt compelled to linger in the hall for a few moment and listen to the two men's conversation.

"The fiend thinks to escape us on the streets," he heard one mumble. "Our brethren shall make short work of his false hopes." He called to the Hammerites on the street level, briskly yelling orders and instructing to them to concentrate their search efforts in that vicinity.

A low creak of wood indicated to the thief that the man's companion had risen back to his feat. "This one is already gone. Undoubtedly the divine judgment of the Builder himself struck her down for consorting with his enemies."

Satisfied that he had heard enough, Garrett quietly returned to the stairs and began to swiftly make his way back to the common room. Upon reaching the ground, he quickly made his way to the entrance. The entire room was in chaos, with most of the patrons opting to flee themselves before more Hammerites arrived to impart further justice on the less important sinners once they had finished with their main prey.

He quickly blended in with the departing mob, pulling his hood low across his features on the off chance that anyone here should recognize him. His fortune had been remarkably poor this week and he

saw no point in tempting fate even further. The group surge for the door, taking him along with the flow.

A few seconds later, they he had managed to reach the streets and could practically taste freedom within his grasp. Those hopes were quickly dashed when he saw detachments of mounted Hammerites, sealing off both ends of the street. The thief silently cursed fate, which seemed to be railing against him as of late. The Hammers were thoroughly checking each person who passed through the hastily erected roadblocks. If he wanted to get out of the situation intact, the thief was going to have to devise an alternative plan.

Garrett continued on with the main group for a few more moments before splitting off onto a side alley. He knew that the small street only doubled back onto the main street and would thus offer no real form of escape to any besides him. Thus, the crowd of people dwindled to nothing soon after he passed the mouth of the street. Garrett, however, knew of a couple of exits from the alley other than the one leading back to the main road.

Upon reaching on of the alley's many dead ends, he unslung his bow from his back and began to inspect the surrounding building critically. Most were made of simple oak or mortar, with tightly woven thatched roofs. Garrett quickly found what he was looking for in the form of an old, but sturdy three-story frame, which appeared to be some form of bakery. He suspected the only the bottom floor was the shop, while the upper two levels belonged to the baker and his family. At this time of night, he was hoping that they would all be asleep or, better yet, out of town.

He selected and notched an arrow before taking careful aim at an overhanging rafter that he could see poking out from underneath a layer of thatch. He could feel his right eye narrowing in on the target with a precision and accuracy that still unnerved him more than the thief cared to admit. Magics in general and those favored by ancient evil gods in particular, were entities that he would prefer to avoid as much as possible. He silently let the arrow fly, its path making little more than a whisper in the night. A split second later a soft thud confirmed that the arrow had managed to hit it's target.

A thin, supple cord dangle from the back of the arrow, ending directly in front of him. Because of its size, it was not an easy rope to grip, but certain concessions in weight had to be made or the arrow would never make it beyond a few meters when fired. Fortunately, the Keepers had drilled him extensively on climbing using any manner of available rope. He still remembered the time that he had been forced to surmount a fifty pace span using a strange cord that, while strong enough to hold three times his own weight, had scarcely been more substantial than a spiders web. He had done it, but it had been many hours later before his hands had finally started to uncramp.

Garrett quickly brought his mind back to the present as he began his ascent. Hopefully, he could make his way from roof to roof until he arrived at another street. From there, it would be child's play to loose the Hammerites in the twisting streets. After that, he could simply lie low for the next couple of days until the Hammerites lost interest in finding him. He could then set about finding who exactly it was that had arranged for his convenient meeting with the order of

the Hammer and repay them for their kind hospitality.

The thief grabbed the edge of the beam before hauling himself onto the roof. He then quickly hauled in his rope and took off silently across the thatch, making sure to always stay above a support beam. The house directly behind it was one story taller and had a tile roof as well; thus he quickly changed to the higher and firmer ground. The moon was only a small sliver the darkened sky which, fortunately for him, illuminated little of his surround area. A thief's moon, it was sometimes affectionately called by himself and his associates.

Garrett was just about ready to consider himself in the clear and pat himself on the back for accomplishing such a clean escape. Then a sudden beam of light pierced the darkness of the night. Garrett threw up a hand to shield his left eye at the bright onslaught, which seemed to be originating from the street. He quickly followed the stream of light to its source, a large mechanical device being operated by two Hammerites.

He silently cursed his luck as he dropped into a crouch and slid behind a chimney. He vaguely remembered hearing one of his associates mention that the Hammers had developed a new toy a few months ago. The large, gas burning lights could be transported by means of horse drawn wagon and burned with such intensity that they could through a beam of illumination nearly a mile. Another one of the devices ignited on the other end of the street and slowly began to sweep the rooftops along the first.

A third light suddenly appeared behind him and Garrett knew that he would be unable to avoid detection by the devices. It would only be a matter of time before he was trapped in between on of the several beams. Thus, he decided it would be better to be moving when he was spotted. The thief shot out from behind the chimney and began a mad dash across the tiles. As he ran he quickly began to formulate a new plan. He would have to make it back to the street beyond the blockade, and then he would at least have a glimmer of a chance of loosing them in the alleys.

Garrett tried not to wince as one of the three probing lights finally caught him. He overrode his instinct to freeze in place and continued moving.

"Halt, thou fiend!" one of the Hammers shouted at him.

Not likely, unless, of course, this is just about returning some of those arrows that I may have inadvertently left in your temples, he thought wryly.

"Fire!" came the cried command from below. In response, Garrett heard what sounded like close to half a dozen bowstrings twang. A split second later he felt the arrows land around him, barely missing his feet and crashing into the roof or cutting the air directly in front of his face. Thankfully, none managed to find their target.

On second thought, you can go ahead and keep those arrows if you like. Garrett worked to keep his apprehension in check as he continued his desperate flight. The second volley of arrows soon arrived prompting him to instinctively duck a little lower as he ran. He felt a red hot flash of pain across his right shoulder and didn't

need to look back to know that his cloak now sported a large horizontal slash.

After what seemed like an eternity, though it couldn't have been more than a few seconds, Garrett reached the edge of the roof and leaped off into the darkness. The beams of light lost him momentarily as he landed on a lower roof, crouching to absorb the shock of the impact. Instead of rising to his feet, he dropped to his stomach and rolled down the slanted surface of the slate roof. He fought a growing sense of vertigo as his momentum increased, finally flinging him off the building into the darkness yet again.

He fell endlessly through the darkness, while all around him he heard the sounds of shouting men, humming longbows, and whistling arrows. The sound of a bone jarring crash was suddenly added to the cacophony as he landed hard on the ground. The thief took just a moment to orient himself before attempting to rise back to his feet. Thankfully, he had landed in a pile of refuse which had served to cushion his landing somewhat. Unfortunately, he now smelled even worse than he had after wading through Lord Bafford's sewer system.

Garrett leaned heavily on a nearby wall as he finally regained his feet. His shoulder ached fiercely now and his head was beginning to throb slightly. But, seeing as he didn't have a great deal of time before the Hammerites would be able to track him down, he didn't have the time necessary to nurse his wounds. His body screaming in protest, he pushed off from the wall and began a brisk jog down the street.

The thief quickly took to the shadows once again as he rounded the corner, cloaking himself in the darkness and invisibility. He managed to hide himself just in time, for a few moments later three Hammerites charged down the street, their heavy iron mallets menacingly displayed. Garrett simply stood still and allowed them to charge past him and down the next alley. After the sound of their footfalls had begun to fade, he ventured forth onto the street and ducked down another road.

All about he could still hear the sounds of frustrated captains and acolytes futilely searching for him. They must have called out almost the entire garrison for me. Don't I feel honored. Even as the thought crossed his mind, Garrett wondered if stealing their holy first hammer might have been going just a little too far, even for him. I guess even saving their sorry hides from an unpleasant fate at the hands of the Trickster isn't enough gain me redemption for that offense.

Garrett pulled up short of rounding a corner when he heard the soft neigh of a horse. Sticking to the shadows, he slowly leaned his head around the corner for a quick glance. He wasn't sure if he should have been relieved or dejected at what he saw. The alley was a long and narrowly built, having the one entrance on his end and a low stone wall at the far side. He knew that the wall was low enough for him to be able to scramble over it, even with a bad shoulder, and high enough to prevent a mounted rider from following. Unfortunately, said mounted rider was standing between him and the wall, and for some reason the alley was extremely well lit, destroying his chances of simply sneaking by.

The thief sighed heavily as he reached for his belt pouch. Why was it that things always had to become so complex for him all the time? Upon receiving no answer, he drew a deep breath and dashed around the corner towards the Hammerite.

The mounted Zealot soon noticed his presence and brought his horse around. "Halt, who art thou? State thy business."

Garrett declined to answer and simply kept charging directly towards the man.

The suspicion on his opponent's face quickly changed to an expression of alarm and anger. "Brothers, over here! The fiend has shown himself!" He dug his heels into the flanks of his horse and set off in Garrett's direction. "Thou shalt pay for thy crimes thief!"

Any one else may have laughed at the utter absurdity of the situation, a man in simple leathers and a mounted soldier wielding a larger hammer charging towards each other as if they were knights jousting. Garrett, knew that he didn't have a prayer of defeating his opponent in fair combat. But since he had no intentions of engaging the man in a combat that could even come close to passing for fair, he didn't really let that fact bother him too much.

He pulled his hand from his belt pouch and in a smooth quick motion launched the land mine that he had retrieved directly at the hooves of his enemy's horse. The Hammerite hadn't even seen what Garrett had done and was thus completely unprepared for the result when his mount stepped squarely on the object. The resulting explosion dropped the creature to its side, and threw its passenger headlong across the alley.

Never breaking his stride, Garrett deftly sidestepped the flailing horse as it slammed into the ground and tumbled past him. The thief didn't even look back, but instead continued his sprint to the wall and quickly scrambled over it. After dropping to the ground on the other side of the barrier, he returned to the shadows. Garrett could hear the sounds of the horse in its death throws as well as the quiet groan that he recognized as being the sound of a completely incoherent man.

The thief smiled and nodded in satisfaction to himself. That was on Hammerite who wouldn't be reporting back to his cohorts any time soon. That fact would give him more than enough time to finish loosing his persistent pursuers in the maze of back streets and alleys that he knew so well. Like a shadow, he slipped away into the night and finally made good his escape.

Garrett knew that he was being followed. He had known it for the past fifteen minutes but had elected not to do anything about the fact until the individual in question made a move. After all, it had been several hours since he had managed to lose the last of the Hammerites searching for him and he wasn't overly concerned that one of them might have managed to locate him again. In all likelihood, they were still tirelessly combing the streets around the Golden Crown in, convinced that he was still hiding among the alleys there. The Hammers were nothing if single-minded.

The thief halted his steps and made a show of examining some wooden crafts on display in the window of a cabinetmaker. While doing so, he silently tracked the moments of his mysterious admirer. To his disappointment, the individual decided not to take the opportunity that Garrett was providing to confront him. The thief sighed wearily. He considered himself a rather patient man, but that patience was beginning to reach its end. It was past time to have conversation with his current admirer, whose identity he pretty much knew by now anyway.

Garrett gave one last glance at the wooden cabinets and proceeded to walk down the street. The sun was slowly beginning to crest the horizon in the east, splashing a dull light across the square. But, despite the sun, a master thief, such as himself, could still find adequate cover for concealment. He had once heard legends that some of the greater Keepers had been capable of concealing them selves in the shadows of a noon day sun.

He slipped around the corner to a side street and immediately dropped back behind an old barrel and pile of crates. He waited patiently for a few moment and was not disappointed. A few seconds later, a wispy thin form came around the corner, and warily began moving down the alley. The slender figure moved slowly, carefully examining the surrounding before finally proceeding.

Garrett decided that he had delayed the confrontation long enough. "You looked a lot better as a brunette, Bottlemaker." He called from the shadows.

Shanna whirled around , her knife drawn and for a moment, Garrett thought that he might be forced to make another tactical retreat. "You tried to kill me to save your own hide," she whispered with venom in her voice.

"Please," he said with as much disdain as he could muster. Garrett walked slowly out into the light, keeping his hands in plain view so that she could see that he had no weapons drawn. "Do you honestly think that I couldn't tell that at least thirty-five to forty pounds of your girth were fake?" He shook his head ruefully. "At most, all I did was give you a little scratch, the rest was just padding."

"Just a scratch?" she grabbed the edge of her tunic and yanked it upwards to reveal a angry diagonal slash across her stomach. "You call this just a scratch? It hurts like hell."

Garrett felt a slight twinge of guilt but never allowed the emotion to reach his face. Instead he shrugged nonchalantly and replied, "I may have cut a little bit deeper than I had intended. It's still a better fate than what the Hammers would have had planned for you if they had taken you alive."

He noticed her expression soften marginally as she allowed her tunic to drop back down over her belly. She still held the dagger poised and ready to strike though. "You expect me to believe that instead of trying to kill me to cover your tracks, you were actually faking my death so that the Hammerites wouldn't arrest me for aiding a known criminal?"

Garrett casually folded his arms and leaned against the alley wall. "I told you, good fences are too valuable a commodity to squander."

They stood in silence, studying each other carefully for several minutes before Shanna finally relented and lowered the blade. "More than just the hammers saw my body tonight. My front as a barmaid at the Golden Crown in is effectively finished. That fact could very well cost me my livelihood."

Garrett very nearly snorted. "Don't tell me that you don't have at least a dozed other fronts that you can use to further your business throughout the city." He shook his head ruefully. "All I cost you was one front that you used to deal with perhaps half a dozen second rate clients." He smiled arrogantly. "You'll be able to make up for that on your cut of my next job."

She eyed him skeptically. "You certainly have a very high opinion of yourself."

I figure that anyone who can steal from Gods and get away clean is entitled to a somewhat high opinion of his abilities, he thought. "You'll have to make your own judgments on that account."

They continued to stare at each other challengingly for a few more minutes, each carefully studying the other's face to see if their features would reveal anything. Finally, mischievous glint entered into her eyes. "Since you brought up the subject of payment, we should probably discuss the terms of your employment..."

He quickly moved to cut her off. "My fences receive a twenty percent cut of all commissioned merchandise. Anything extra that I manage to pick up while on a particular heist is mine, free and clear. I reserve the right to refuse any offered job and insist on an arranged meeting as per my specifications with all prospective clients before I accept an assignment."

Her eyes showed a slight trace of incredulity. "You ask for a great deal for being a simple thief. I get a thirty- percent cut from all of my other employees. What makes you think that you deserve any special consideration?"

In response, Garrett simply stepped forward, took hold of the edge of her tunic and lifted it to reveal the slash mark once again. "This could have been a lot deeper if I had simply left you to the Hammerites."

She sighed heavily, in response. "Granted. All right, I'll make a deal with you, raise it to a twenty-five percent cut and I will see that you get half of your payment in advance of each job." She smiled knowingly. "I know how frustrating it must have been for you to pull off the Bafford job and never receive any payment for your efforts. Consequently, if you still happen to have that old scepter lying around anywhere, I would gladly take it off of your hands."

Garrett shook his head and smiled ruefully. This woman knew far too many rumors about him and was far too interested in confirming all of them. "You've got yourself a deal, twenty-five percent it is. As for the Bafford Scepter, well, we'll just have to see about that."

"You do have it, don't you?" she asked.

Garrett merely smiled and shrugged his shoulders, letting her interpret the expression in any manner that she wanted. She didn't look particularly pleased at his response but obviously knew better than to press the issue. If and when he decided that he trusted this woman, he might try to pawn the Bafford Scepter off on her. Until such time, it would remain carefully hidden where it was.

"Well, now that we have finished discussing business, we should probably get off of the streets and out of the open. After all, what with all the cutthroats and cutpurses that wander the streets at this time, it might not be safe for two law-abiding citizens such as ourselves." She didn't quite snort in amusement at his comment, but he could definitely see her lips twitching in a barely suppressed grin.

They slowly moved back out into the open streets, walking side by side and trying to appear as a normal couple to any casually watchers. More and more, the streets were beginning to come to life as people emerged from their dwellings to begin the day. Garrett decided that it was past time for him to return to his own humble abode and sleep of the effects of his mad dash for freedom from the Hammers. But, before he left, there was one last item of business that he needed to handle.

"By the way," he said quietly so that none other than she could hear his words. "Seeing as Shanna has been "retired" from her duties, what should I call you now and where should we meet?"

She was silent for a few moment, apparently deep in thought, before finally responding. "Meet me at the Oakwood estate over on Manship Way. Simply ask for Diana."

"Let me guess, you have a job as one of the maids," He quipped.

"Not exactly," she responded with a mysterious smile. "Just make sure that you don't look the part of the scoundrel when you show up on the front doorstep."

Garret simply nodded in acknowledgment, his mind too tired to try to decipher her cryptic statement. "I will take my leave of you then. Expect to hear from me within a couple of days." And without any further words, he slid away from her into a side alley.

After a few more twists and turns to ensure that no one was following him, Garrett finally turned his steps toward his apartment. Despite its forbidding beginnings, the night had yielded some promising results. His new fence appeared competent enough, if a little on the curious side. Curiosity about potential clients had never been a trait he himself had cultivated. But then, If he had spent a little bit more time researching Constantine before having accepted the Eye job, he might have been able to avoid a great deal of pain on his part.

The thief quickly pushed his such thoughts from his mind. His past was behind him and as he had told the Keepers, he was quite through with his past. Now was the time for him to put his mind to the future, to getting more lucrative jobs, to rebuilding his retirement

fund, and, most importantly, to getting the rent money before his landlord from hell threw him out.

-fine

-una scimmia mangia una banana ogni mezz'ora

End
file.